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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: EARLY ELECTIONS PREPARATIONS IN FULL
SWING

REF: SKOPJE 262

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) In a series of meetings with Macedonia's political leaders April 21-23, the Ambassador and DCM urged all parties to ensure free, fair and non-violent parliamentary elections on June 1. Although the official campaign period begins May 11, parties already are floating their campaign platforms, informally campaigning, and wooing coalition partners. The latest polls show ruling eMacedonian VMRO with a two-to-one lead over its main rival, SDSM. Among the eAlbanian parties, governing coalition partner DPA still trails opposition DUI. All political leaders shared with the Ambassador and the DCM their concerns about the conduct of the campaign and the elections, as well as the potential for violence in eAlbanian areas. Coalition partners VMRO and DPA assured the Ambassador that everything "would be kept under control," despite alleged "DUI provocations." Opposition SDSM, DUI and even governing coalition partner NSDP were less optimistic, and gave a litany of already registered election-related irregularities they claim the governing coalition has committed. End summary.

PARTIES SCRAMBLE TO FORMULATE ELECTION MESSAGES...

¶2. (SBU) Just weeks before the May 11 official start of the parliamentary election campaign (reftel), Macedonia's politicians are trying to formalize their electoral platforms. Opposition SDSM is talking about "a European platform," while the ruling VMRO says it will have "a European and a patriotic platform." Menduh Thaci, President of eAlbanian coalition partner DPA, told the Ambassador April 21 that his party's campaign would concentrate on "lower level, everyday issues like education, culture, infrastructure and employment." By avoiding the emotionally-charged eAlbanian themes dealing with the use of language and flags, Thaci went on, "we will lower intra-ethnic tensions, and we can build on our social policy successes in the current government."

¶3. (SBU) Thaci's rival, eAlbanian opposition DUI's President Ahmeti, told the Ambassador April 23 that there is a developing split between those parties that consider themselves "patriotic" and those that refer to themselves as "European oriented." NSDP's President Petkovski told the

Ambassador April 22 that his party's policy stances were closer to DUI's than to NSDP's coalition partner VMRO's. Surprised by PM Gruevski's statement that NATO membership could wait for another 10 years (if the name issue remained unresolved), Petkovski added that EU and NATO integration were the only guarantors for Macedonia's existence. In an April 23 meeting, SDSM's President Shekerinska informed the Ambassador that SDSM was still working on its platform, while acknowledging that the program would be important only to "the most loyal" SDSM voters. "Everybody else," she said, "would focus only on the lists of candidates and coalition partners."

...AND FUTURE COALITION PARTNERS

¶4. (SBU) Behind-the-scenes coalition building has started in full force. A self-assured Thaci told the Ambassador that Gruevski "is convinced that he cannot have a government without DPA" and that Gruevski had promised Thaci he would fulfill DPA's social demands before forming a government with him. NSDP's Petkovski also claimed that Gruevski had offered him a place in a future coalition, but "we have to find a balance between Gruevski's populism and Macedonia's strategic goals." Gruevski's recent public statements have indeed leaned towards a preference to form a coalition with one of his current partners, although his Chief of Staff has told us that the Prime Minister has made no firm decision in that regard.

¶5. (SBU) DUI's Ahmeti apprised the Ambassador of his own coalition talks with several small parties, including a Turkish party, the Bosniak party, and a Roma party. Regarding SDSM coalition partners, SDSM President Shekerinska

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indicated the party was considering a coalition of the appropriate size and makeup to help attract both "traditional SDSM and SDSM-leaning voters," noting that many of the latter had not come out to vote on election day in the past.

GOVERNMENT PROMISES FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS...

¶6. (SBU) In a joint International Community Principals (U.S., NATO, EUSR, and OSCE) meeting with the leadership of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) April 21 to discuss security issues related to the upcoming elections, the Ambassador noted that each member of the MOI team would play a key role in ensuring MOI personnel would behave professionally and correctly on Election Day. Minister Jankuloska acknowledged the unique importance of the 2008 elections, and said the GOM wanted to "meet or exceed the standard" for conduct of the campaign and voting. She hoped to re-engage adequate numbers of police who had experience with the 2006 elections and to coordinate with political party security chiefs to prevent incidents. DPA's Deputy Minister of Interior Elmazi added that, in addition to Kondovo, other sensitive areas (mainly in the eAlbanian areas) would be closely monitored. Police Director Todorovski noted that the MOI already had an idea where there might be electoral irregularities, and had drawn up a plan to address any attempts to disturb the peace during the campaign period or on Election Day.

¶7. (SBU) During their April 21 meeting, DPA's Thaci bristled at the Ambassador's comment that the 2006 elections had been generally free and fair. Rattling off a list of alleged irregularities in DUI-controlled areas in 2006, Thaci predicted that "DUI will continue to behave provocatively." The Ambassador emphasized that, since Thaci was in power, he had a greater responsibility to ensure there were no election-related problems. Thaci agreed, twice admitting that the "responsibility for secure elections falls on us." (Note: Disturbingly, while leaving the Chancery April 21, Thaci told Emboff "I don't need to get my hands dirty. I have the police to do that." End note.)

...DOUBTS AND CONCERNS

¶8. (SBU) In an April 21 conversation with the DCM, eAlbanian PDP's President Vejseli said that free and fair elections were of utmost importance to his party since "that is the only way we could have a voice in any elections." He was doubtful, however, that the elections would be peaceful. Concerned about ballot stuffing by both DPA and DUI, he predicted that "DUI will be the bigger offender." NSDP's Petkovski echoed Vejseli's concerns about the fairness of the elections. He pointed out that DPA's recent promise to hand out 3,000 new jobs was a bad sign, which indicated potential election problems ahead related to government misuse of public funds for campaign purposes.

¶9. (SBU) Predictably, in their respective meetings with the Ambassador, opposition SDSM and DUI presented lengthy lists of grievances and asked for greater international community pressure on the GOM to ensure free and fair elections. SDSM's Shekerinska raised several concerns, including the Prime Minister's alleged use, to his party's advantage, of legal inconsistencies related to the State Electoral Commission. Shekerinska noted also concerns about equal access to the media. She cited TV station policies on political advertising as allowing "under-the-table deals" advantageous to the government. DUI's Ahmeti voiced similar concerns, especially regarding the state TV and how it is effectively "blocked" to all but the ruling parties.

¶10. (SBU) Both Shekerinska and Ahmeti pointed to their experience, as coalition partners in power during the 2006 elections, as an example of the government conducting free and fair elections. Ahmeti recalled that in 2006 Gruevski had requested that the government provide security for the elections, and now Ahmeti was requesting the same from Gruevski's government. Ahmeti was concerned, however, that as long as a DPA official was the Deputy MOI, there would be problems. In her meeting with the Ambassador, Shekerinska said that during the 2006 elections, her government had held

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off on major policy or financial decisions during the campaign season. She brought along a multi-page list of government initiatives recently started by VMRO and DPA, including reconstruction of schools and announcements of new government jobs, which the GOM was pushing during this pre-campaign season.

POLLS GIVE GRUEVSKI AND HIS PARTY STRONG LEAD

¶11. (SBU) An April 21 poll by the Center for Research and Politics showed that VMRO enjoys a two-to-one lead over SDSM, while eAlbanian DUI led its rival, eAlbanian DPA, by almost 4%. Smaller parties that had seats in the last Parliament did not receive any support from those polled, while NSDP, LDP and eAlbanian PDP limped across the finish line with less than one percent support each. The Macedonian News Agency published April 23 the results of the most recent IRI poll done between April 11-15. Eagerly awaited by all political parties, the IRI numbers showed an even greater advantage for VMRO (29% of the vote, or a 3% increase over VMRO's December 2007 result); a one percent drop for SDSM at 11% of respondents; DUI at 10% of respondents; and a three percent jump for DPA to 8%.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Well before the May 11 official election campaign kick-off, election buzz fills the air. Recent minor violent incidents in eAlbanian areas (with damage to property only) are only isolated incidents but most analysts predict they will escalate in the run-up to Election Day.

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